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A N S W E R S

# THE BOOK OF REVELATION



**Catholic Answers**

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The Book of Revelation

Jimmy Akin



***20 Answers: The Book of Revelation***

**By Jimmy Akin**

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## Introduction

The book of Revelation—also known as the Apocalypse of St. John—is perhaps the most controversial book of the Bible. Reading it is a fascinating experience. It is filled with dramatic images, mysterious symbols, and enduring themes.

Revelation is so rich and thick with symbols that it can be daunting—and not just for ordinary laypeople. Many ministers hesitate to tackle it. For example, it was the only book of the New Testament that the Protestant Reformer John Calvin did not write a commentary on.

But countless authors *have* written commentaries and other books expounding Revelation and what they think it means. These books contain a bewildering array of different and conflicting interpretations, which contribute to the controversy surrounding it.

In recent years, there has been a flood of books, movies, and videos about Revelation. Many explore what various “prophecy experts” claim will happen in the near future. An example is Hal Lindsey’s 1970 book *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, which sold millions of copies and led to him writing popular follow-up books like *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon*, *The Terminal Generation*, and *Planet Earth: The Final Chapter*.

In such works, Lindsey and other authors taught their readers to expect an imminent “rapture,” in which all true Christians would be caught up to be with Jesus in heaven while all hell breaks loose on earth.

A set of books that popularized these ideas in fictional format was the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Spanning sixteen volumes, these novels imagined what the world would be like before, during, and after the rapture and related events. Despite the fact they were fiction, they claimed to be based on what Revelation predicted for our actual future.

It’s a perennial temptation to see the events of Revelation being fulfilled in one’s own day. For the last 2,000 years, many have thought that the world was about to end, and numerous authors have predicted exactly when in their lifetimes it would happen. So far, all of these predictions have been wrong.

Scholars have dubbed the enterprise of interpreting Revelation in terms of current events “newspaper exegesis.” *Exegesis* is the study of how to interpret a text, and newspaper exegesis involves bending Revelation and other

prophetic texts to fit whatever happens to be in the news.

Some Evangelicals even have weekly radio programs and TV shows—such as *The Hal Lindsey Report*—devoted to looking at current news items and reading them in light of what they take to be Bible prophecy.

But is this the right approach? Should we really assume that the book of Revelation is talking about events in our near future and that the world is about to end?

The controversy over the book is principally due to the question of how it should be interpreted, and the different principles used to interpret it are responsible for the bewildering variety of theories that people have claimed it supports.

Here we offer twenty answers about the book of Revelation, how it should be understood, and what actually lies in our future.

## **1. What is the book of Revelation?**

Revelation is one of the books of the New Testament. Many assume that it was the last book of the Bible to be written, but this is something we do not know. Other books may have been written later.

One reason people think Revelation was written last is the fact that it's printed in the back of the Bible, making it last in *canonical* order. This is because Revelation contains prophecies that describe the end of the world, so it's logical to place it last in sequence.

The Old Testament contains many prophetic books, but Revelation is the only one in the New Testament. The four Gospels and the New Testament letters contain individual prophecies, but only Revelation is entirely devoted to the subject of prophecy.

Revelation also is different from the prophetic books of the Old Testament. Works like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel contain revelations that the prophets received at various points in their careers, and the books collect these prophecies and weave them together with historical incidents from their lives.

By contrast, Revelation presents its prophetic material as a single, grand vision. We even know what day of the week the author began receiving it—a Sunday—because he tells us it began when “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day” (Rev. 1:10). It’s possible that he saw the vision all on a single day or that

he saw it in parts, and he just doesn't mention the gaps between individual visions. One way or the other, he apparently received it all in a short space of time rather than over a lengthy prophetic career.

The book is different in another way. Whereas the Old Testament prophetic books are written to a general audience, Revelation is written to a specific one. In fact, its literary form is that of a letter. It uses the standard opening for first-century letters, which involved a “(sender) to (receivers)” formula. Thus, after an opening title and exhortation, we read, “John to the seven churches that are in Asia” (1:4).

Revelation is, in essence, a letter communicating the prophetic material the author received. And, by ancient standards, it was gigantic. The average length of letters from that time and place was eighty-seven words;<sup>1</sup> Revelation is 9,852 words long in Greek, making it more than a hundred times the size of a normal letter. It's longer than any other letter of the New Testament, and it's almost as long as the Gospel of Mark. John's readers must have been astonished when they got it!

When inspiring Scripture, God used the knowledge and background of the biblical authors, and it is clear that John had a detailed, intimate knowledge of the Old Testament prophetic books. Revelation contains more than a hundred references to them.

Now that Jesus had come, the author realized that the whole prophetic enterprise of the Hebrew Bible was coming together and being crowned by his own work. As scholar Richard Bauckham states, John “understood his prophecy to be the climax of the tradition of Old Testament prophecy, because in the revelation made to him by Jesus Christ was disclosed the secret of the divine purpose for the final coming of the kingdom of God.”<sup>2</sup>

John thus realized that he was writing a work that summed up and brought to culmination the labors of all the biblical prophets before him. Revelation is a momentous book!

## **2. Who wrote Revelation and why?**

Four times, the book of Revelation identifies its author as “John” (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). This was an extremely popular name at the time. In fact, *John* was the fifth-most-common name for Jewish men in Palestine in this period.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that John does not further identify himself (e.g., as John Mark,

John son of Zebedee, or John of Jerusalem) shows that he must have been well known to his audience. He only says that he is “your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus” (1:9a, ESV).

The only biographical detail he adds is that, when he saw the vision, he “was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9b).

Patmos is a Greek island in the Aegean Sea, only thirteen square miles in size. John says he was on the island because of “the testimony of Jesus,” which could mean that he was there on an evangelizing mission, but the context of persecution and tribulation has convinced scholars that John was on Patmos as a punishment for his Christian preaching.

This has led some to claim that Patmos was a penal colony, but the evidence does not support that. It is more likely that John had been banished or exiled to Patmos from a major city. Banishment was a common way of dealing with troublesome upper-class individuals as an alternative to execution or forced labor. A person in exile would be allowed to live in a remote location—away from where he had been causing trouble. This seems to have been why John was on Patmos.

There is a question of which John wrote Revelation. Historically, the most popular view is that it was John son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles. This view can be traced to as early as A.D. 155, when it was endorsed in the writings of St. Justin Martyr.<sup>4</sup>

However, there is a dispute about this in the early Church Fathers. Some say that they do not know who wrote Revelation and doubt its apostolic authorship. Others suggest that it was written by a figure known as John the Elder or John the Presbyter. According to early sources, John the Elder was not one of the Twelve but he was an eyewitness of the ministry of Christ, and in later years he—like John son of Zebedee—lived in Ephesus, resulting in two famous Johns having their tombs there.<sup>5</sup> Some Church Fathers also attribute some of the Johannine books of the New Testament to him. Jerome reports that many held him to be the author of 2 and 3 John,<sup>6</sup> and some in the early Church suggested he was the John who wrote Revelation.<sup>7</sup>

This may be supported by the fact that John the apostle was an uneducated, Galilean fisherman from the lower class (Acts 4:13) and not the kind of

person who would receive the mild punishment of exile. It has been argued that John the Elder was a member of the Jerusalem aristocracy,<sup>8</sup> and the option of exile was often applied to members of the upper class when the death penalty would have been used on members of the lower class who had committed the same crime.

Whoever wrote the book, the reason why it was written is made clear in its opening verse, which describes it as “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place” (1:1). The Greek term for revelation—*apokalupsis*—is the origin of our word *apocalypse*. In the first century, this meant “a revealing,” so the book reveals information given by Jesus Christ.

This information concerns “what must soon take place” from John’s first-century perspective. He was writing to warn his readers of a series of events in the Roman world that would involve the persecution of Christians and God’s judgment on the pagan world order that oppressed them.

### **3. When was Revelation written?**

The book of Revelation was written during the apostolic age, but precisely when is debated. Today, there are two principal schools of thought. The first dates Revelation to the reign of the emperor Domitian (A.D. 81–96), and specifically toward the end of his reign (c. 95), whereas the second school places it earlier, in the A.D. 60s. Currently, the most common view is the former, which gained popularity in the twentieth century. However, in the nineteenth century, the earlier date was the most common.

The view that places Revelation in the 90s is based on statements in some of the early Church Fathers that John was banished to Patmos during the reign of Domitian. This view is thought to have been held by Irenaeus of Lyons around A.D. 180.<sup>2</sup>

However, there is ambiguity in what Irenaeus said. In Greek, he can be understood to say either that “it” (the revelation of John) was seen during the reign of Domitian or that “he” (John himself) was seen during this time. If the latter is the case, Irenaeus is commenting not on when the book was written but on how long John lived.

There also is confusion in early Christian sources about *which* Roman emperor banished John to Patmos.

According to the confused tradition in Epiphanius (*Pan.* 51.12.1–2), John left Patmos when he was over ninety years old during the reign of Claudius Caesar (A.D. 41–54). Some confusion results from the fact that Claudius was one of the names of Nero, who is referred to both as Nero Claudius and as Nero Claudius Caesar. There is therefore general agreement that John was banished to the island of Patmos by a Roman emperor, and some agreement that this emperor was Domitian. Some notices are ambiguous (e.g., Clement of Alexandria and Origen) and make it possible to argue that the emperor who banished John was Nero rather than Domitian.<sup>10</sup>

If it was Nero who banished John, then he would have been on Patmos much earlier, for Nero reigned between A.D. 54 and 68. As we will later observe, there are strong connections between Nero and Revelation (see answer 14).

A piece of evidence supporting an earlier date is the fact that Revelation describes the Jerusalem temple as still operating, for John says, “I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, ‘Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, with its worshipers. But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for forty-two months’” (11:1–2, NIV).

This depicts “the temple of God” in Jerusalem (“the holy city”) in a state of operation. “With its worshipers” is literally “and those worshiping it”—using the present tense. But the temple was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70 when they conquered the city and it was “given to the Gentiles,” who trampled it. The passage thus depicts the temple before its destruction and suggests a date for the book prior to 70.

The most precise clue to its dating may be the interpretation it gives of the seven heads of the beast that John sees: “The seven heads are seven mountains. . . . They are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes he must remain only a little while” (17:9–10).

The seven mountains have been identified since ancient times as the seven hills of Rome, and so the seven kings involve a reference to Roman emperors. Note that, as the Roman emperors did, the beast blasphemes God, persecutes the saints, rules the world, and receives worship from all but Christians (13:6–8).

If the seven heads are the line of first-century emperors, the five who “have fallen” would be Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. The one who “is” would be Nero’s successor, Galba, and the other who “has not yet come” would be Otho, who did—indeed—reign “only a little while” (three months). This would place the composition of Revelation during the reign of Galba (June 9, A.D. 68–January 15, A.D. 69).

#### 4. How is Revelation structured?

It is clear to everyone who studies Revelation carefully that the book is intricately structured, with both large and small patterns that keep recurring. The problem is how to fit these patterns into an overall outline.

The most obvious structures in the book are based on the number seven. Early in the book, there are messages given to seven churches (2:1–3:22). Later, seven seals are removed from a scroll (6:1–8:1). Then seven angels blow trumpets (8:7–11:19). And finally, angels pour out seven bowls containing plagues (16:2–21). The parts dealing with the messages, seals, trumpets, and bowls are major sections around which the book is written.

But there is a great deal of material inserted in and around these blocks, making it harder to discern the overall structure. Some of these sections also seem to be built around the number seven, but in a less obvious way.

For example, Revelation 12:1–14:20 describes what may be understood as seven signs that John sees. The first two—a woman in heaven and a dragon—are explicitly called signs (12:1, 3), and the remaining five are introduced by the formula “and I saw” (Greek, *kai eidon*). Similarly, Revelation 19:11–21:8 describes what may be called seven sights, each of which is introduced by the formula “and I saw.”

In light of this, I have proposed the following as an outline of the book:<sup>11</sup>

1. *Introduction* (1:1–8)—This section contains the superscription of the book (1:1–3) and its opening in the form of a letter (1:4–8).
2. *Seven Messages* (1:9–3:22)—This section contains an introductory vision of Jesus (1:9–20), after which Jesus dictates individual messages to the seven churches to whom the letter is being sent (2:1–3:22).
3. *Seven Seals* (4:1–8:1)—John is caught up to heaven, where he has an introductory vision of the worship in heaven (4:1–11) and sees a scroll that

only Jesus can open (5:1–14). Jesus then proceeds to remove each of the seven seals that keep the scroll closed, and a dramatic event occurs as each seal is removed (6:1–8:1). This section also contains an interlude in which John sees Jesus with 144,000 Israelites (7:1–8) and a great multitude from every nation (7:9–17).

4. *Seven Trumpets* (8:2–11:19)—In heaven, John sees seven angels who blow trumpets, and a dramatic event occurs as each trumpet is blown. This section also contains an interlude in which John is given a scroll to eat (10:1–11) and he visits Jerusalem (11:1–14).

5. *Seven Signs* (12:1–14:20)—From an earthly perspective, John sees a series of seven signs, including a woman in heaven (12:1–2), a dragon with whom she is in conflict (12:3–17), a beast from the sea (13:1–10), a beast from the land (13:11–18), the Lamb and the 144,000 (14:1–5), a group of three angels flying in heaven (14:6–13), and two harvests of the earth (14:14–20).

6. *Seven Bowls* (15:1–16:21)—Back in heaven, John sees an introductory vision of seven angels that have seven last plagues (15:1–8), after which the angels pour out these plagues using ceremonial bowls (16:1–21).

7. *The Whore of Babylon* (17:1–19:10)—One of the bowl angels takes John to witness the downfall of a figure known as the Whore of Babylon, who is associated with the beast from the land.

8. *Seven Sights* (19:11–21:8)—John sees a series of seven sights: Jesus and his heavenly army (19:11–16), an angel standing on the sun (19:17–18), the beast and his earthly army (19:19–21), an angel who comes down from heaven and binds the devil for a thousand years (20:1–3), the thrones of martyrs who reign during the thousand years (20:4–10), the throne of God and the final judgment (20:11–15), and the appearance of the new heaven and the new earth (21:1–8).

9. *The Bride of Christ* (21:9–22:11)—One of the bowl angels takes John to witness the glory of the bride of Christ—the heavenly city new Jerusalem, which now rests on the new earth.

10. *Conclusion* (22:12–21)—John concludes the letter by emphasizing the nearness of the events it describes.

There are various themes running through these segments. Some of them (the seals, trumpets, and bowl segments) take place in heaven; others (the sign and sight segments) focus on the conflict on earth; and two others contrast God’s people and those who persecute them using the images of two women (the whore and the bride segments).

Once we have a grasp of the structure of the book, it is easier to make sense of the sections and the individual symbols they contain. This provides a basic overview, though there are more subtle structures in the book than can be described here.<sup>12</sup>

## **5. How does Revelation use symbols?**

The book of Revelation has given its name—or at least its Greek name—to a whole type of literature. As we noted, the Greek word for revelation is *apokalupsis*, and older Bibles sometimes call the book the Apocalypse of St. John.

For several centuries before and after the time of Christ, works like Revelation were very popular, and scholars refer to these books as “apocalyptic literature.” Although in contemporary English the word *apocalypse* is associated with the end of the world, this theme isn’t required for a book to be an apocalypse.

A characteristic of apocalyptic literature—one of the main things that distinguishes it from ordinary prophecy—is that it uses a lot of symbolism, especially when representing history and what God plans to do in it. This symbolism is often interpreted for the visionary by a heavenly figure, such as an angel, and sometimes the visionary is given a tour of the invisible world and gets to see places like heaven and hell.

Daniel 7–12, where the rise and fall of various empires is depicted as a series of strange animals, is considered an early example of apocalyptic literature. And Jesus’ discussion of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24, Mark 13, Luke 21) is often called the “little apocalypse” because of its similarity to Revelation.

However, Revelation itself is considered a definitive example of apocalyptic literature. In it, John sees God’s purposes in history depicted using

symbolism, some of this symbolism is interpreted for him by heavenly figures, and John gets to see parts of the invisible world, including God's heavenly throne room and temple (4:1–5; 14, 11:19, 14:15–17, 15:5–8), the abyss or “bottomless pit” of the demons (9:1–2, 11; 11:7, 17:8, 20:1–3), and the lake of fire where the condemned are sent (19:20; 20:10, 14–15).

Revelation helps us understand its own symbolism when Jesus, an angel, or John himself tells us the meaning of a symbol and we learn things like:

- Seven stars represent the angels of seven churches (1:20).
- Seven lampstands represent seven churches (1:20).
- Seven torches of fire before God's throne represent the seven spirits of God (4:5).
- Seven eyes of the Lamb represent the seven spirits of God sent throughout the earth (5:6).
- Golden bowls full of incense represent the prayers of the saints (5:8).
- People wearing white robes represent those coming out of the tribulation (7:13–14).
- Two witnesses represent two olive trees and two lampstands before the Lord (11:3–4).
- Seven heads of the beast represent seven hills and seven kings (17:9–10).
- Fine linen represents the righteous deeds of the saints (19:8).

These interpretations are helpful in figuring out the symbolism of Revelation, and they teach more than one lesson that may not be obvious.

For example, the two witnesses of chapter 11 are interpreted as “the two olive trees and the two lampstands which stand before the Lord of the earth” (v. 4).

This is striking because witnesses are typically people, but people are neither olive trees nor lampstands. As a result, we have a symbol (the witnesses) interpreted as representing *other* symbols—and more than one additional symbol! This shows us that we need to be sensitive to the complex relationship that can exist between symbols. It is not always the case in

Revelation that a symbol stands for a single, easily identifiable thing.

The passage also is striking because the two olive trees and the two lampstands before God are not mentioned anywhere else in the book. This shows us that we must be prepared to look beyond Revelation to find out the meaning of some of its symbols.

Another lesson is found when we are told in chapter 17 that the seven heads of the beast “are seven hills on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings” (vv. 9–10). Here we have a *single* symbol (the heads) that stands for *more than one* thing (the hills and the kings). This reveals that an individual symbol in Revelation can stand for multiple items, not just one.

Using the passages where Revelation interprets itself, it is possible to get clues about how other passages should be understood. Since we know that in 1:20 stars represent angels, we should consider the possibility that the same symbolism is being used elsewhere in the book.

For example, in 12:4 a third of the stars are swept from heaven and cast down to the earth, and in 8:10 and 9:1 individual stars fall. We could interpret these passages naturalistically and suppose that they represent meteor showers or asteroid strikes, but 1:20 suggests that we should consider whether they involve angels instead. This does not mean that stars *always* represent angels in Revelation (see answer 6), but it is a possibility that needs to be considered in these passages.

The interpretations of some of its symbols that Revelation provides are helpful, but they represent only a small portion of the symbolism in the book. If we want to understand other passages, we need to look elsewhere.

## **6. Where does John get his symbols?**

One of the greatest mistakes people make when interpreting Revelation is failing to understand where it draws its images from. Readers practicing “newspaper exegesis” seek to interpret things in the book in terms of things that they are familiar with as modern people rather than what John and his audience would have thought about.

For example, 9:1–11 describes the opening of the supernatural location known as the abyss or “bottomless pit” where demons are housed. Smoke emerges from the abyss, and out of the smoke come “locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth.”

John describes these terrifying creatures as follows:

“In appearance the locusts were like horses arrayed for battle; on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, their hair like women’s hair, and their teeth like lions’ teeth; they had scales like iron breastplates, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. They have tails like scorpions, and stings.”

Despite what this passage would have meant to John and his audience, some recent interpreters have seen the locusts as representing the Cobra helicopters that were used in the Vietnam War of the 1960s, with nerve gas being sprayed from their tails.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from the fact that mechanical Cobra helicopters do not look like the biological description John gives of the locusts (nor do they spray nerve gas from their tail rotors), this is not how the original audience would have understood them. The locusts are monstrous creatures confined in a supernatural location (the abyss) with demons, and they are led by “the angel of the bottomless pit,” whose name means Destroyer in Greek. Confronted with these facts, we should interpret them as demonic creatures, not helicopters.

This kind of error is made possible by lack of familiarity with where John’s imagery comes from. It does not come from the modern world but the ancient world, and the great majority of the time its source is to be found either in the Old Testament or other literature of this period.

For example, when the two witnesses described in 11:3–4 are said to be “the two olive trees,” this is a reference to Zechariah 4:3–12, which was a familiar passage to those brought up on the Hebrew scriptures.

This brings us to a key principle of interpretation: whenever Revelation does not interpret an image for us, our *first* move should be checking to see if it was used in the Old Testament or other literature of John’s period.

This can be done by checking any of the many scholarly commentaries on Revelation. Short, popular-level commentaries are unreliable for this purpose and may not mention prior uses of John’s imagery, but scholarly commentaries will provide a good survey of what John is likely drawing on.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to looking at the Old Testament, we need to be sensitive to other sources John may be drawing on. For example, the two witnesses of chapter 11 are also said to be “two lampstands which stand before the Lord of the earth” (v. 4). Although there is a single lampstand mentioned in Zechariah 4, there aren’t two of them, indicating that John is drawing on something more than this.

One possibility is found in ancient illustrations of synagogues, where two menorahs (lampstands) are pictured in front of the shrine containing the synagogue’s copy of the Torah. John thus may be drawing on the common arrangement of synagogues in his day.

An awareness of Old Testament background can help us avoid mistakes even when Revelation does interpret its own symbolism. Though 1:20 establishes that stars *can* be used to represent angels, this is not always the case. In 12:1, John sees a woman clothed in the sun, standing on the moon, and wearing a crown of twelve stars. This imagery is drawn from Genesis 37, where it represents the family of Israel. Thus, in Revelation 12 the stars are not meant to be angels but identify the woman in some way with Israel (see answer 13).

We also need to be sensitive to the ways that Revelation can change and adapt imagery taken from the Old Testament. In 4:6–8, John sees “four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all round and within, and day and night they never cease to sing, ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty.’”

This imagery is drawn from two places: the cherubim that Ezekiel sees around God’s throne (Ezek. 1:5–14) and the seraphim Isaiah sees surrounding it (Isa. 6:2–3). John’s living creatures contain elements from the descriptions of both the cherubim and the seraphim, but they are not identical with either of them. They thus represent a fusion of two Old Testament images and should not be identified simply as one or the other.

Something similar happens in 13:1–2, where John sees “a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear’s, and its mouth was like a lion’s mouth.”

This imagery is drawn from Daniel 7, where the prophet sees a series of four strange beasts that represent empires that oppressed God's people. The beast that John sees combines characteristics of all four of Daniel's, suggesting that it is another persecuting empire like the others, but without being strictly identified with any of the four that Daniel saw.

Just how important it is to be familiar with the Old Testament is underscored by the fact that we often think of Jesus' future coming as referring to just one thing: the Second Coming at the end of the world.

However, in Scripture—including in the book of Revelation—Jesus refers to an additional “coming” or “comings” prior to this, and the background needed to understand them is found in the Old Testament, where Scripture uses the image of God riding the clouds like a chariot, coming in judgment on those who have done wrong (Ps. 104:3, Isa. 19:1–2, Jer. 4:13–14, Ezek. 1:4, 26–28). It was even prophesied that the Son of Man would ride on such a cloud and be given dominion by the Lord (Dan. 7:13–14).

In such passages, God did not appear physically in the clouds but came spiritually as a judge. Jesus' prophecy thus may be fulfilled symbolically in the events of A.D. 70: after the Jerusalem authorities destroyed the temple of Jesus' body (John 2:19–22), Jesus came spiritually to judge the Jerusalem temple, which he had found wanting (Mark 11:15–17, John 2:13–17) and so announced its doom (Mark 13:2).

This also is the explanation for a statement that Jesus makes to the high priest Caiaphas. When asked if he is the Christ, the Son of God, Jesus replies: “I am; and you will see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62).

Jesus is not prophesying that the Second Coming will occur during Caiaphas's lifetime. His statement reflects Daniel 7:13–14, where the Son of Man is brought before God *in heaven* to receive his kingdom. The prophecy thus refers to Jesus ascending into heaven (Acts 1:9), where he received his kingdom (Acts 7:55–56) and where he now reigns (1 Cor. 15:24–26).

Theologians also have explored the idea of an *adventus medius* (“middle advent”) of Christ prior to the Second Coming. It is a spiritual “coming” of Christ in which he is preached to the world and becomes present with his people.<sup>15</sup>

This is the explanation for passages such as when Jesus says, “If a man loves

me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23) or “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20). These refer to spiritual comings of Jesus, not his Second Coming. We thus need to be aware that not all passages that speak of Christ as coming refer to the end of the world.

A prominent theme in Revelation is Jesus’ “coming,” but the one under discussion appears not to be the Second Coming just before the final judgment. Instead, it appears to be a spiritual coming in judgment on the forces persecuting his people in the early Church (see answers 17 and 18).

## **7. How do historicists interpret Revelation?**

Revelation says it describes what will “soon” occur (1:1, 22:6), but it also describes events taking place centuries after John’s time (20:7) and at the end of the world (21:1). So, how do the contents of the book relate to history?

It’s clear that the beginning of the book (chs. 1–3) deals with events in John’s own day and the end of the book (chs. 21–22) deals with the distant future, but what about the middle of the book (chs. 4–20)? How does it relate to history? Over time, several views have developed, and we will look at four: historicism, idealism, futurism, and preterism.

*Historicism* holds that the middle of Revelation describes events that are roughly evenly spread out between the first century and the end of the world, so they essentially form a roadmap or timeline of what will happen between John’s day and the end of the world.

It is easy to see how a view like this could develop. Many early Christians assumed that Jesus would be returning within their own lifetimes (cf. 1 Thess. 4:15), though eventually they learned that this would not be the case (cf. 2 Tim. 4:6–8). The disclosure in Revelation that a millennium would occur before the end of the world (20:1–6) also made that clear.

For many living in the first and second century, it would be natural to assume that they were living in the middle of the book of Revelation and that “soon” the later events of the book would arrive. However, as Church history progressed, Christians in the third, fourth, and subsequent centuries would need to extend the timeline that the middle of the book was supposed

to cover. Eventually, the timeline was stretched to cover the entirety of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Reformation.

Some Catholic authors in the Middle Ages adopted the historicist view, but it became extremely popular later among Protestants and it was the dominant view among the Reformers, who identified the beast/Antichrist figure of the book with the papacy and used this to demonize the Catholic Church:

For example, the breaking of the seven seals (chs. 6–7) is often said to be the barbarian invasions that sacked the western Roman Empire. The scorpion/locusts that come out of the bottomless pit (ch. 9) are the Arab hordes attacking the eastern Roman Empire, followed by the Turks, represented as the horses with serpents for tails and flame-throwers for mouths. “The beast” (ch. 13) represents the Roman papacy.<sup>16</sup>

Historicism continued to be popular in Protestant circles until the nineteenth century, but it rapidly fell out of popularity, as its shortcomings were becoming more obvious. Although still held among Seventh-day Adventists, it has otherwise completely fallen out of favor among Protestants, and it is not taken seriously by New Testament scholars of any persuasion today.

The reason is that, as time advanced, the arbitrariness of historicist interpretations became ever clearer. Interpreters tended to assume that they were living near the end of Revelation, so as the number of centuries the book needed to cover increased, the interpretations of particular passages kept having to change.

For example, a historicist living before the time of Muhammad (c. 570–632) would not see him in the book at all. But after the devastating invasions of Christendom by Muslim forces, a place for the rise of Islam needed to be found in Revelation, and the later in history that a commentator was writing, the earlier in the book the mention of Muhammad would need to be.

Similarly, interpreters living before the Reformation or Hitler or Communism would not see these in the book, but afterward could want to find them there, forcing a reinterpretation of passages. As the amount of time Revelation needed to cover stretched, more and more historicist

commentaries that disagreed with each other came to be written, leading to a realization that identifications of particular symbols within the book with particular historical events was essentially arbitrary and not grounded in good exegesis.

Another factor leading to the realization of historicism's arbitrariness is that commentators sought to interpret the book almost exclusively in terms of European Christendom, with European popes, kings, wars, and invasions dominating the interpretations of the book's symbols. But after the age of exploration, Christianity was a global phenomenon, and it was not clear why Revelation should be exclusively focused on Europe and ignore developments in the rest of the Christian world.

By the nineteenth century, the Protestant denominations were sufficiently established and felt secure enough that they no longer needed to demonize Catholicism to the same degree, and as passions cooled, Protestant scholars realized that the papacy does not fit the biblical data regarding the Antichrist (see answer 14). They thus no longer needed to interpret Revelation in a historicist way to justify their rejection of the Catholic Church, and the view rapidly fell out of favor—except among Seventh-day Adventists, who maintain a connection between the Antichrist and the papacy.

In addition to the arbitrariness that historicism involves, scholars today also fault it because this view would make the book totally unintelligible to its original audience. If Revelation were a roadmap of Church history, with specific judgments corresponding to events in distant centuries, there is no way John's original readers could have understood what they were referring to. Yet he emphasizes that the contents of the vision are to happen "soon" and expects the reader to be able to figure out symbols in the middle of the book, as when he says, "let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man" (13:18, ESV).

## **8. How do idealists interpret Revelation?**

The *idealist* view of Revelation—which goes by a variety of names, including the *spiritual* or *symbolic* view—is similar to the historicist view in that it sees the middle of the book as relating to all of Church history. However, it does not see it as providing a roadmap or timeline of this period. Instead, it

relates to history in a more general way.

Idealism began to be popular in the nineteenth century as the historicist view was falling out of favor. It is easy to see how a view like this would arise. If it proved impossible to match passages in Revelation to specific events in the course of Church history—as in historicism—then it would be natural to ask if they might apply to history in a less specific fashion.

Thus, Revelation came to be understood by idealists as describing the great conflict between God and Satan that plays out in every part of Church history. Although God will ultimately be victorious, believers in every age will need to face the challenges that the book describes, including persecutions and other disasters.

For example, Revelation 6:3–8 describes a series of horsemen who unambiguously represent war, famine, and death. Idealists would take this as a sign that Christians in every age must be prepared to face these challenges, without seeing the passage as referring to an occasion where a *specific* war led to famine and death. On this view, the passage represents a principle that can occur over and over again in history rather than referring to one particular occasion.

Because idealism holds that Revelation deals with themes that recur throughout history as it builds to its ultimate climax, some have referred to this as the “philosophy of history” interpretation, as Revelation would be seeking to provide a Christian perspective on the meaning of the Church age.

Some idealists also have seen Revelation as proceeding through the Church age more than once. For example, the well-known Protestant author William Hendriksen argued in his book *More Than Conquerors* that Revelation contains seven segments, each of which proceed through the Church age but with different symbols and emphases. He referred to this view as “progressive parallelism.”

Idealism has become very popular in modern commentaries on Revelation, especially in the scholarly community. Perhaps one reason for this is that it frees the commentator from the need to identify passages in Revelation with specific historical events and allows him to write a commentary that can be read by advocates of the other schools (historicism, futurism, preterism), without having to decide the contentious questions that separate them.

The chief problem with idealism is that John does seem to be predicting things that are rather specific when he emphasizes that Revelation was written “to show to his servants the things that must soon take place” (1:1; cf. 22:6, ESV).

As a result, many idealists combine their approach with one of the others. Given the first-century context in which John is writing, idealism is most commonly combined with preterism (see answer 10), though it also is sometimes combined with futurism.

## 9. How do futurists interpret Revelation?

Rather than seeing Revelation as applying to the whole of Church history—as historicists and idealists do—*futurists* hold that the bulk of the book (chs. 4–20) apply to events that are still in our future.

When the Protestant Reformers began using historicism to attack the Catholic Church, two Spanish Jesuits proposed alternative readings. Francisco Ribera (1537–1591) said that John “only foresaw events of the near future and of the final things at the end of the world, but had none of the intervening history in view. The Antichrist was defined as a future individual who would arise in the end times. Babylon was seen as Rome—not under the popes—but in a future corrupted state. This was the beginning of many of the ideas that are now a part of the *futurist* approach to Revelation.”<sup>17</sup>

Initially, futurism was not popular among Protestants, who saw it as a Catholic attempt to avoid their criticisms. However, this began to change in the nineteenth century, and futurism became more popular.

In particular, it was adopted by the Anglo-Irish clergyman John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). Darby became a leader in a sect known as the Plymouth Brethren, and he incorporated futurism as a pillar in a theological system he developed, known as *dispensationalism*. According to this view, world history is divided into a number of periods or “dispensations” in which God deals with mankind in different ways.

One of these dispensations is a future thousand-year reign of Christ on earth known as the *millennium* (cf. Rev. 20:1–6). Dispensationalism introduced the idea that this period would be preceded by a “rapture” in which all true believers would be caught up to be with Jesus in heaven while

the Antichrist reigned on earth in a period called the *tribulation*. After the tribulation, Christ would return, slay the Antichrist, and inaugurate a thousand-year earthly kingdom. Only after this would the end of the world come.

Dispensationalism was promoted in America by the theologian C. I. Scofield (1843–1921), who incorporated it into the notes of his popular study Bible, *The Scofield Reference Bible*. By the mid-twentieth century, dispensationalism had become extremely popular in American Evangelicalism, and it was further popularized by books such as Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* in the 1970s and Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* series in the 1990s.

These proved so popular that the dispensationalist understanding of Revelation, with its belief in a rapture and an earthly reign of Christ, entered pop culture, and many today assume that it is the standard or even the only way to understand Revelation. Despite this, there are futurists who do not accept a dispensationalist interpretation of the book—as well as people who reject futurism altogether.

Futurists often claim that Revelation should be taken in a highly literal sense, and by confining its events to our future, their view is uniquely able to do this. “For example, there has never been a time in the past when a third of the sea turned to blood, killing a third of the fish and sinking a third of the ships (Rev. 8). If this is to have a literal fulfillment, it must still be in the future. Other approaches must take the passage nonliterally.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite their emphasis on a literal interpretation, futurists acknowledge that Revelation contains a large number of symbols. For example, there will not be a literal red dragon that sweeps a third of the stars out of the sky with its tail (12:3–4). Consequently, it is not a question of whether Revelation *should* be read literally but *what mix* of literal and symbolic readings best explains the book.

Since people are naturally curious about the future, a chief attraction of futurism is that it would allow Revelation to give us a detailed map of events that are still to come. However, just because we might like a theory does not mean that it is true.

One of the main problems of futurism is that, if it were true, it would make the large majority of the book irrelevant to its original audience, as it would

be describing events that occurred thousands of years after John's time. This would not sit easily with John's repeated assurances to his audience that the events of the book will happen "soon" (1:1; 22:6). Neither would they be able to understand the prophecy, as John expects them to when he tells the original audience to calculate the number of the beast (13:18).

In fact, the bulk of the book would be irrelevant to Christians living in *every* generation—except the last. Only the final Christians would be able to correctly interpret the events of the book and draw practical lessons from them.

Another problem for the futurist reading is that the beginning of the book does not contain a large jump in time. The material in chapters 1–3 explicitly deals with the first century, but futurists hold that at the beginning of chapter 4 there is a sudden leap of 2,000 or more years into the future.

They attempt to find this leap in 4:1, which says: "After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.'"

Since the rapture is not mentioned in the book, dispensationalists also frequently see the command to John to "come up here" as indicating the point at which the Church is raptured. However, this is not a literal reading of the text. The text does not say anything about Jesus descending from heaven to rapture his Church away so that they will be protected from the reign of the Antichrist. Instead, it refers to John being caught up to heaven to see the vision that the book contains.

More fundamentally, a leap of 2,000 or more years is not indicated. The text simply says John will be shown what will take place "after" what he has already seen, but "after" would not be understood by the original audience to mean thousands of years after—not when they have been told that the events will happen "soon" and when John has been told, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near" (22:10).

In part because of these difficulties, futurism is most common in popular-level expositions of Revelation, though there are a few scholarly commentaries with this perspective.

## **10. How do preterists interpret Revelation?**

The Latin word *praeter* means “before,” and *preterists* hold that the bulk of the book of Revelation was fulfilled before our time and applies to the early part of Church history. On this view, chapters 1–19 deal with events in or near John’s own time, then there is a long period described symbolically as a thousand years (20:1–6), after which comes the end of the world (20:7–22:1).

This solves the problem of how to get from the past to the future in the book. The great majority of the text *does* deal with events that would happen “soon” from John’s perspective, then there is the long period of time he indicates—the period in which we are now living—and finally there are the events still in our future.

There had been preterists earlier in Church history, but the view received new attention after the Protestant Reformers began using historicism to demonize the Catholic Church. While one Spanish Jesuit—Francisco Ribera—proposed a futurist reading, another, named Luiz de Alcazar (1554–1613), proposed a preterist reading, “in which chapters four through eleven were interpreted as depicting the church’s struggle against Judaism, culminating in the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70; chapters twelve through nineteen as the church’s struggle with paganism, ending in the fall of Rome in 476; and chapters twenty through twenty-two as the triumph of the church in papal Rome.”<sup>19</sup>

Because it undermined Reformation-era rhetoric, preterism was not popular with Protestants. However, after the passions of the period had cooled, it began to attract Protestant adherents. Variations on preterism are common in scholarly commentaries on Revelation—often combined with the idealist view—and in recent years there have been an increasing number of popular-level works advocating preterism.

When it comes to Revelation, there are several versions of preterism. The main differences concern whether the book deals with God’s judgment on Jerusalem, Rome, or both. One view holds that the book covers the same events that Jesus did in his Olivet Discourse, in which he prophesied the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70 (cf. Mark 13, esp. vv. 1–5). This view identifies the Whore of Babylon (Rev. 17–18) as the apostate city of Jerusalem, which executed the Messiah.

Another view holds that the Whore of Babylon is pagan Rome, which

persecuted Christians. On this view, Revelation may deal with God's judgment on Roman paganism and its defeat by the advance of the gospel.

Some, such as Luiz de Alcazar, have thought that the book deals with the judgment on both Jerusalem and Rome. He did this by dividing the book into two sections, one for each city, but others have proposed that the Whore of Babylon represents *both* Jerusalem and Rome—or any great city that sets itself in opposition to God.

Even adopting a broadly preterist viewpoint does not mean we must completely exclude other views. Prophecy can have more than one fulfillment. For example, in the 700s B.C., God gave King Ahaz a sign that he would not be defeated by his enemies: “Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isa. 7:14). This child had to be born in Ahaz's day to serve as a sign for him, but the prophecy had another, greater fulfillment when Jesus was born (Matt. 1:23).

Consequently, even though the bulk of Revelation may have its literal fulfillment early in Church history, this does not prevent it from also having fulfillments in other ages, including just before the end of the world.

Thus, we might reasonably argue, in the words of Scripture scholar Robert H. Mounce,

In John's vision the beast is the Roman Empire [preterism]. It is that concentration of secular power which claims a religious sanction for its cruelty and injustice. Yet the beast is more than the Roman Empire. In a larger sense it is the spirit of godless totalitarianism that has energized every authoritarian system devised by man throughout history [idealism]. At the end of time, the beast will appear in its most malicious form. It will be the ultimate expression of deified secular authority [futurism].<sup>20</sup>

## **11. What are the seven churches?**

The book of Revelation is addressed to “the seven churches that are in Asia” (1:4). Today, we think of Asia as a vast continent that includes nations like India and China. In John's day, however, the term referred to a single Roman province that is in the western part of what is now Turkey.

In 1:11, we learn the identities of these seven churches, as John is told, “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to

Philadelphia and to Laodicea.”

We know that there were more than seven churches in Asia at this time. One of them—the church of the Colossians—is famous because St. Paul wrote one of his letters to it. Another—Hierapolis—is less well known but also was present at the time (Col. 4:13).

So, why does John speak of “the seven” churches of Asia if there were more than that? The number seven is extremely important in Revelation. It occurs 275 times in Revelation’s 404 verses. The number clearly has symbolic value, but its precise meaning is debated.

One proposal is that seven can stand for completion—like the seven days in a week—and so John may have selected seven churches to represent the conditions of churches everywhere in his day. Others challenge this and argue that the number seven may simply convey the divine authority of his message.

Can we determine why these particular seven churches were selected? It may be due to the fact that John had visited them and the Christians there knew who he was, allowing him to simply introduce himself as “John,” without saying anything more about his identity (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8).

Another factor is that they are all connected by a single path along the Roman road network, and they would be visited in the same order given in 1:11. The letter courier John used would have sailed from Patmos to Ephesus, the closest port city, then worked his way north to Pergamum and then turned southeast and worked his way down to Laodicea, delivering the letter at each of the seven churches in sequence.

Chapters two and three contain a series of messages that are given to these churches. Sometimes, they are called the “letters” to the seven churches, but they do not fit the format of a first-century letter. Revelation itself is written as a letter, and these are short, more personalized messages within it.

Each message is addressed to “the angel of the church” in a given town. Since the Greek term *angelos* can simply mean messenger, some have suggested that these “angels” may be human figures, such as the bishop of each church. However, most commentators understand *angel* in its familiar sense and see the messages as addressed to the guardian angel of each church.

Each message is addressed to the angel from Jesus, and they draw imagery from John’s initial vision of Christ (1:12–20). They also are described as

“what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7, 11, 17, etc.), indicating that they are jointly sent by the Son and the Spirit.

The body of each message typically contains a word of commendation for the local church—things that its members are doing right—as well as a word of condemnation—things they are doing wrong.

For example, the church of Ephesus is given this compliment: “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false; I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary” (2:2–3).

But then, the Ephesians are told, “I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand [i.e., church] from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate” (2:4–6).

There are exceptions to this pattern of compliment and condemnation. Two of the churches—Smyrna and Philadelphia—receive only praise, while one church—Laodicea—receives only criticism.

Each message concludes with an exhortation to hear what the Spirit is saying and with a promise to “him who conquers”—that is, he who succeeds in living the Christian life despite its difficulties. The promises vary from one church to another but represent aspects of eternal life, as we see in the promise given in the message to the Ephesians: “To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (2:7).

Scholars have noted that the messages reflect the conditions in the seven cities in the first century, and archaeology has shed light on the meaning of some of the things said in them.<sup>21</sup> We also learn about individual members of some of these congregations. For example, in Pergamum there was a Christian named Antipas who had been martyred, and in Thyatira there was a woman John refers to as “Jezebel” (after the wicked Israelite queen; cf. 1 Kings 21, 2 Kings 9), who claimed to be a prophetess but taught Christians to do immoral things.

The messages in chapters two and three unambiguously deal with conditions in the first century, but futurists believe that there is a sudden

jump to the distant future at the beginning of chapter four. To ease this transition, some futurists have proposed that the seven churches represent seven ages in church history, with Ephesus representing the apostolic age and Laodicea representing the current and final period.

This view has found favor among some dispensationalists, and it papers over an otherwise inexplicable lurch from the first century to the end of the world, but it has absolutely no foundation in the text. Thus the view is not taken seriously in the scholarly community, and it does not easily fit with the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* (that the Bible is our only rule of faith) as there is nothing in the text that would tell the reader these seven churches represent seven ages of history. Consequently, most Protestant authors reject it as nothing more than convenient supposition.

## **12. What are the seals, trumpets, and bowls?**

In addition to the messages to the churches, several other sections of the book are clearly organized around sequences of seven elements. We later read about the seven seals (6:1–8:1), the seven trumpets (8:7–11:19), and the seven bowls (16:2–21).

In the overarching narrative of Revelation, after John writes the messages to the seven churches, he is caught up to heaven to see a vision of “what must take place after this” (4:1). There, he witnesses the worship that continually takes place in God’s heavenly temple.

He observes that God is holding a scroll in his right hand, and the scroll is “written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals” (5:1). Most scrolls in the ancient world had writing only on one side and were secured with only one seal. This one is different: it has a lot to say and is very secure.

Scholars have debated the meaning of the scroll. It clearly represents God’s authoritative word (being in his right hand), and perhaps the most natural understanding of it in context is that it is a decree describing the events that John is assigned to prophesy.

The only person able to open the scroll is Jesus, who begins removing the scroll’s seven seals one at a time. As each seal is removed, a dramatic event takes place.

Once the scroll has been fully opened, John writes, “I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them” (8:2). These

angels then blow the trumpets in sequence, and again dramatic events take place.

Since trumpets were used to announce important events, a natural way to understand the blowing of the trumpets is that they announce the events described in the unsealed scroll.

Finally, after the last of the trumpets has been blown, John sees “seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended” (15:1). These plagues are given to them in the form of “seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God” (15:7), which they then pour out to release the judgments.

Today we think of bowls as simple kitchen vessels, but the Greek word used here—*phialê*—refers to a ceremonial bowl used to carry sacred offerings, such as libations of wine. The use of bowls in this section thus represents a liturgical action taking place in God’s heavenly temple.

*Judgment* is the overarching theme connecting the seals, trumpets, and bowls. God’s decree of judgment is first unsealed, then the judgment is announced by the trumpets, and finally it is brought to completion by the pouring out of the ceremonial bowls.

But who is being judged? On a preterist understanding of the book, it could be apostate Jerusalem, pagan Rome, both of them, or something more general, such as corrupt systems that set themselves up in opposition to God.

When it comes to the individual events associated with each of the seals, trumpets, and bowls, some are easier to interpret than others.

For example, when Christ opens the first four seals (6:1–8), John sees a series of four riders on horseback, which have become known as the four horsemen of the Apocalypse (i.e., of Revelation). The horses are of different colors—white, red, black, and “pale” (literally, “green”)—and because Christ is later depicted riding a white horse (19:11–16), many have interpreted the first horseman as Jesus.

However, in context the first horseman is described as a conqueror who “went out conquering and to conquer.” The next three horsemen unambiguously represent war, famine, and death, and they thus form a natural progression: conquerors start wars, which lead to famines, and wars and famines lead to death. This sequence may reflect the “wars and rumors of wars” Jesus warned of (Mark 13:7), including the Jewish War of the A.D.

60s or the Roman civil wars taking place in 69, the “Year of Four Emperors.”

Other judgments are more difficult to match with historical events, such as when the third bowl is poured out and the rivers become blood (16:4). This may have a more symbolic meaning, perhaps echoing the deliverance of the Israelites after God turned the Nile to blood in the exodus, or it may reflect actual historical conditions, such as waterways bloodied by those who fell in combat.

### **13. Who is the Woman Clothed with the Sun?**

After the seven trumpets have been blown, we read, “And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. She brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne” (12:1–2, 5).

What does this woman represent? Note that the woman gives birth to a male child who is to rule the nations with a rod of iron. That’s a reference to the messianic prophecy in Psalm 2:8–9, and Jesus fulfilled this prophecy. The fact that the child is caught up to the throne of God is a reference to Jesus’ ascension into heaven, so we have another confirmation that the child is Jesus. That would indicate that the woman is his mother, the Virgin Mary.

However, the symbolism connected with the woman is drawn from Genesis, where the patriarch Joseph has a dream involving the sun, the moon, and the stars (37:9–10). In the dream, the sun and moon represent Joseph’s father and mother and the stars represent his brothers, the patriarchs of the tribes of Israel. This has led many to say that the woman in Revelation 12 is Israel.

You could go further and note that the Church is the *spiritual* Israel, leading some to suggest that the woman is the Church. This can be supported by the verse saying that the woman has other children who are “those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus” (12:17)—in other words, her other children are Christians, suggesting she is the Church.

So, is the woman Mary, Israel, or the Church? It is important to recall that in Revelation a symbol can point to more than one thing (see answer 5). As

a result, we do not have to choose between these meanings. The text contains indications that point to all three, and so the woman can represent all of them.

This view was supported by Pope Benedict XVI, who wrote,

When the book of Revelation speaks of the great sign of a woman appearing in heaven, she is understood to represent *all Israel*, indeed, the *whole Church*. . . . On the basis of the “corporate personality” model—in keeping with biblical thought—the early Church had no difficulty recognizing in the Woman, on the one hand, *Mary herself* and, on the other hand, transcending time, the Church, bride and mother, in which the mystery of Mary spreads out into history.<sup>22</sup>

On another occasion, he said, “This woman represents Mary, the mother of the Redeemer, but at the same time she also represents the whole Church, the people of God of all times, the Church which in all ages, with great suffering, brings forth Christ ever anew.”<sup>23</sup>

We thus don’t have to force a choice between the possible meanings of what the woman represents. In keeping with the richness of the way Revelation uses symbolism, to use Pope Benedict’s phrases, she can be Mary *and* “all Israel” *and* “the whole Church” in different ways.

This understanding also may allow interpreters to understand more easily some of the things Revelation says about the woman. For example, 12:2 describes her crying out in the pangs of childbirth, but Mary is traditionally thought to have had a painless delivery. These pangs might then refer to the national pain that Israel was experiencing at the time of Christ’s birth, such as the difficulties inflicted by the Roman occupation they were under in this period.

#### **14. What is the Beast?**

At the time of the Reformation, it became common for Protestant interpreters to identify the papacy with the Antichrist and “the beast” of Revelation. There are several problems with this view.

First, the Antichrist is not mentioned in Revelation. The term appears only in John’s letters (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3, 2 John 7). It is speculative to identify the Antichrist with the beast.

Second, John says that “men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; such a one is the deceiver and the Antichrist” (2 John 7). But popes do not deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. Their very job is based on the fact that Jesus *did* become incarnate and die for man’s sins. Identifying the papacy and the Antichrist violates the biblical data.

Third, the book of Revelation contains more than one beast, but the most famous is one John sees rising from the sea in chapter thirteen. It incorporates animal symbols that had previously been used in the book of Daniel to represent a line of pagan kingdoms that oppressed God’s people (Dan. 7).

This beast has seven heads, and we are told, “The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes, he must remain only a little while” (Rev. 17:9–10).

The seven mountains have been identified since ancient times as the seven hills of Rome. Interpreters thus have commonly understood this beast as the pagan Roman Empire that persecuted Christians in John’s day and in the early centuries.

As seven kings, the beast’s heads are seen as connected to the line of first-century Roman emperors. Like these emperors, the beast blasphemes God, persecutes the saints, rules the world, and receives worship from all but Christians (Rev. 13:6–8). It also has the number 666 (Rev. 13:18), which is what “Nero Caesar” (NRWN QSR) adds up to in Hebrew and Aramaic according to the numerical values the letters have in these languages ( $N+R+W+N+Q+S+R = 50+200+6+50+100+60+200 = 666$ ).

This would suggest that the literal fulfillment of the beast is to be found in the first-century line of Roman emperors. However, this would not prevent there from being another fulfillment of this prophecy before the end of the world. It could be similar to the way Daniel’s “abomination of desolation”/“desolating sacrilege” (Dan. 9:27, 11:31, 12:11) could be fulfilled both in the time of the Maccabees (1 Macc. 1:54) and again in the generation that followed Jesus (Matt. 24:15).

Thus the world’s final villain—described by Paul as “the man of lawlessness” and commonly called “the Antichrist”—is likely to echo the beast of Revelation and Roman emperors like Nero.

Many have wondered about the “mark of the beast” that its followers

receive on their right hands or foreheads, allowing them to buy and sell (Rev. 13:16–18). Some have suggested that this might involve modern technologies like implanted RFID chips, but this is not what the passage would have meant in its original context.

In the first century, disobedient slaves were sometimes tattooed or branded to show who owned them, but the beast's servants seem willing rather than disobedient. On the other hand, the devotees of some pagan gods also were marked for the one they worshiped, so that may be in view.

Yet there is reason to think that Revelation does not intend this to be a literal, visible mark. In the Old Testament, God spoke of his laws being a mark on the Israelites' hands and foreheads (Exod. 13:9, 16). In Ezekiel, the righteous are invisibly marked on their foreheads by an angel (Ezek. 9:4), as are a group of 144,000 Israelites in Revelation (7:3–8, 14:1). Indeed, Christians in general are said to be sealed by God (2 Cor. 1:22, Eph. 1:13, 4:30).

Understood in light of these parallels, the mark of the beast would not be a physical brand or tattoo—much less an undreamt-of future technology—but a symbol of a pagan's willingness to employ his head and his hand in the service of the Roman cult of emperor worship and thus reap the economic rewards of participating in imperial public life—from which Christians were often excluded.

If this mark has a parallel in the future, its form can only be a matter of speculation.

## **15. What is the False Prophet?**

In chapters twelve and thirteen of Revelation, we meet three sinister figures that are sometimes referred to as an unholy trinity. The first is a red dragon with seven heads and ten horns (12:3), the second is the beast that emerges from the sea, which also has seven heads and ten horns (13:1), and the last is a beast “which rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb, and it spoke like a dragon” (13:11).

The dragon is elsewhere identified as Satan (20:2), and we've seen that the beast from the sea is identified in a special way with the line of first-century Roman emperors. But who is the beast from the land?

Later in the book, the devil and the beast from the sea are associated with a

third figure known as “the false prophet” (16:13, 19:20, 20:10), and most interpreters have understood the beast from the land and the false prophet to be identical. This is partly because the second beast acts like a priest and prophet of the first in the chapter where they are introduced.

We are told that the beast from the land “makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast” and “works great signs.” By means of these signs, “it deceives those who dwell on earth, bidding them make an image for the beast,” and it is able to animate the image “so that the image of the beast should even speak, and to cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain.” Finally, it compels people to take the mark of the beast so that no one can buy or sell without the mark (13:12–17).

When it comes to the identification of the false prophet, some have pointed to its two lamb-like horns and that it comes from “the land” to identify it as Jewish in origin. The lamb was a sacrificial animal for Jews, Jesus is depicted in Revelation as a lamb (5:6), and Israel dwelled in the promised land. On this proposal, it might represent Jewish leaders who rejected and killed the Messiah and then formed an alliance with Rome to persecute Christians.

However, the false prophet is portrayed as a strong supporter of the cult of emperor worship, and Jewish leaders were very much opposed to that. This suggests that we should consider other possible meanings for the symbol.

The fact that it looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon may simply mean that the false prophet outwardly seems harmless but nevertheless carries a satanic message, and the land it comes from may be the land where John and his readers are—Asia—rather than the holy land. In that case, it could represent something native to Asia rather than brought there by means of the sea, like the first beast (the Roman Empire), which arrived by sea.

Consequently, most interpreters have understood the false prophet to represent the cult of emperor worship in Asia. With the exception of Caligula, Nero, and Domitian, first-century Roman emperors were not worshiped in Rome during their lifetimes. It was considered improper for them to demand divine honors in their own capital. However, there was no problem with people in other parts of the empire worshiping the emperor, and many people in the provinces sought to prove their loyalty by treating him as a god and building temples to him. There were several such temples in Asia.

As a result, the false prophet fits well with the native Asian cult of emperor

worship and the local officials who promoted it.

The image that the false prophet sets up would naturally be understood as an idol of the emperor. Promoters of various cults in the Greco-Roman world would sometimes equip statues of divinities with hidden speaking tubes that allowed oracles to be given through them by their priests.<sup>24</sup> They also used an early form of animatronics or robotics to cause the idols to move.<sup>25</sup> Such trickery may have been employed by advocates of emperor worship to produce “pretended signs and wonders” (cf. 2 Thess. 2:9).

When it comes to the false prophet imposing the mark of the beast so that people may buy and sell, many interpreters have understood this as referring to the need to participate in emperor worship as a condition of conducting business. Trade guilds had religious rites that could involve the imperial cult, boycotts could be targeted against merchants who were perceived as disloyal, businesses might refuse to sell to unpatriotic customers, and even the coins people used to buy and sell often carried depictions of the emperor as a god. Refusing to participate in emperor worship could have serious economic consequences even when martyrdom did not result.

## **16. What is the Whore of Babylon?**

We first hear of the Whore of Babylon shortly after the two beasts are introduced, but we are given very little detail. John simply hears an angel crying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of her impure passion” (14:8).

The next clear mention occurs after the seventh bowl is poured out and John writes, “And God remembered great Babylon, to make her drain the cup of the fury of his wrath” (16:19).

These enigmatic references are then clarified in chapters seventeen through nineteen, which are devoted principally to elaborating on Babylon and its fall. At the beginning of this section, an angel takes John to the wilderness to show him the judgment on “the great harlot.”

He writes,

I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her

fornication; and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: ‘Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth’s abominations.’ And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus (17:3–6).

Babylon was a city in ancient Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), but scholars recognize the use of “Babylon” in Revelation as a symbolic designation of another city (cf. 11:8; also cf. 1 Pet. 5:13, where Peter, who is known to have been in Rome, refers to being in “Babylon”):

- The whore is depicted persecuting Christians (cf. 17:6, 14).
- She is seated on the beast with seven heads, which is likely Rome.
- The beast also has ten horns, which hate the whore, attack her, and burn her with fire (17:16).
- The whore is said to be “the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth” (17:18).

Most scholars see these as pointing to the ancient pagan city of Rome, which persecuted Christians, which was built on seven hills, which had a line of emperors plausibly identified with the beast, and which was the capital of the major empire of the day.

Some scholars have seen the clues as pointing to another city—Jerusalem—which also persecuted Christians in the first century, whose authorities were allied with and supported by the Roman Empire (and thus “seated” on the beast), and which was attacked and burned by an alliance of Roman and other troops in A.D. 70, as Jesus predicted (Mark 13).

Further, Revelation 11:8 speaks of “the great city” where the “Lord was crucified,” the Old Testament speaks of Jerusalem as a whore (Isa. 1:21; Ezek. 16:1, 15–35), and the whore is the antithesis of the bride of Christ, the “new Jerusalem” (Rev. 21:2–22:5), suggesting it is the old Jerusalem.

In Revelation 17:16, the beast and its allies attack the whore and burn it with fire. If the whore is Jerusalem, this would refer to the sack of Jerusalem that occurred in A.D. 70.

On the other hand, if the whore is Rome, it could refer to the Great Fire of Rome in A.D. 64 (which Nero allegedly set) or to the calamitous Year of

Four Emperors in A.D. 69, in which the city was convulsed by civil war and destruction, including fire.

Both identifications are possible, and some have even suggested that the whore may represent *both* Rome and Jerusalem.

The devastation of the whore is described in detail in Revelation 18:1–19:3. Afterward, Jesus appears and destroys the beast and its allies (Rev. 19:11–21), signifying the destruction of the pagan Roman system and the beginning of the new, Christian age, in which the devil is bound “that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years were ended” (Rev. 20:3).

## **17. What is the battle of Armageddon?**

In popular speech, *Armageddon* has become a term for the final military battle of world history. It also has an extended meaning and can refer to any devastating conflict, whether or not it would be the final one. Thus, during the Cold War, people feared that World War III would bring about a “nuclear Armageddon,” even if the human race survived.

The basis for this idea is found in a passage in Revelation that describes the trio of evil beings—the dragon (i.e., the devil), the beast, and the false prophet—who disgorge “three foul spirits like frogs” that “go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty.” These kings then assemble “at the place which is called in Hebrew Armageddon” (Rev. 16:13–16).

We are told that “they will make war on the Lamb [i.e., Jesus], and the Lamb will conquer them” (17:14). This conflict is described in Revelation 19:11–21, and the outcome is that the beast and the false prophet are captured and thrown alive into hell, while the devil is bound for a thousand years, so that he cannot deceive the nations during the millennium (Rev. 20:1–6).

However, the devil is afterward released, and he deceives the nations and again gathers them for battle. His army is then destroyed by fire, and he is thrown into hell alongside the beast and the false prophet. Contrary to popular usage, then, Revelation does not depict Armageddon as the final battle of history but as one *preceding* the reign of Christ.

Scholars debate the precise meaning of the name *Armageddon*. The Greek

word John uses is *harmagedôn*, but he tells us it is of Hebrew or Aramaic origin. The term *har* means “mountain,” and Megiddo was an ancient city in Israel, so most scholars have understood Armageddon to mean “the mount of Megiddo.”

Megiddo sits in the middle of a valley, but, as an ancient settlement that long predates the founding of Israel, it has been rebuilt numerous times, resulting in it sitting atop an artificial hill made up of the residue of all its earlier versions. This artificial hill may be the “mount” that John is referring to. Alternately, some scholars suggest, it may be a true mountain that is *near* Megiddo, such as Mount Carmel.

Whatever the case, Megiddo has a long history as the site of battles. It was a strategically important location, and numerous battles have been fought there, both before and after the founding of Israel. Revelation thus invokes its history as a site of warfare.

The question is how literally the conflict involving it should be understood. Many premillennialists—and especially dispensationalists—see this as a literal military conflict that will occur in Israel, with forces led by the Antichrist, just before the beginning of the earthly reign of Christ in the millennium.

However, as we will see, there will not be an earthly reign of Christ before the end of the world (see answer 18). Instead, the millennium is best understood as the reign of Christ that is occurring now in heaven and, through his Church, on earth (CCC 680). The battle of Armageddon thus might be understood as related to the Jewish War of the A.D. 60s, when the forces of pagan Rome (“the beast”) attacked Jerusalem and destroyed its temple.

Alternately, it may be understood not as a literal military conflict but as a spiritual conflict between the forces of paganism and the gospel, which led to the devil being bound so that he could not stop the proclamation of Christ to the nations. Revelation would be depicting this spiritual conflict in military terms and drawing on the history of Megiddo as a site of warfare as part of that imagery.

However Armageddon is to be understood, Revelation does predict a future conflict at the end of the Christian age, and it may involve military as well as spiritual elements, including the involvement of the Antichrist.

## 18. What is the Millennium?

The term *millennium* comes from Latin roots that mean “thousand” (*mille*) and “year” (*annus*). The millennium is thus a thousand-year period mentioned in Revelation 20:1–6.

Although some interpreters take the number 1,000 literally, others see it as a symbolic figure that simply indicates a long period of time (cf. Psalms 50:10, where God says that “the cattle on a thousand hills” are his—meaning that the animals on *all* the hills are his).

During the millennium, the devil is bound so “that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years were ended,” and John sees a group of thrones with those “to whom judgment was committed” seated on them.

He also sees a group of Christian martyrs who had refused to worship the beast (see answers 14 and 15). In some translations, it says that this group of people “came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.” However, other translations merely say that they “lived and reigned” with Christ during the millennium. The Greek allows either translation.

A key question is how this event is to be understood, and historically there have been three major options. In Protestant circles, these have been dubbed *premillennialism*, *postmillennialism*, and *amillennialism*.

According to *premillennialists*, Christ’s Second Coming will occur *before* (pre-) this thousand-year period, and Jesus will physically reign on earth (likely from Jerusalem) during it. This view was common among some early Christian writers, and in the twentieth century it became popular among Evangelical Protestants. In Catholic circles, this view has often been called *millenarianism*.

According to *postmillennialism*, the Second Coming will occur *after* (post-) the millennium, and during that period Christ reigns from heaven, along with his saints, in a way that produces a golden age on earth. This view was popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries among English-speaking Protestants. It became less popular after the horrors of the twentieth century’s two world wars and growing secularization led many to conclude that we were not moving toward such a golden age in which the Church progressively triumphs.

According to *amillennialism*, we are now living in the millennium, which spans the Christian age and will be followed by the Second Coming. Christ

is currently reigning in heaven, and the saints live and reign with him there. On earth, the devil is bound so that he cannot deceive the nations by stopping the spread of the gospel, though this does not result in a paradisiacal golden age where all earthly problems vanish. This view has been the position of most scholars throughout history, including the original Protestant Reformers.

Although Catholics tend not to use the word *amillennial*, this term best corresponds to the Church's understanding of the millennium. The Magisterium has specifically rejected premillennialism (or millenarianism). According to the *Catechism*, "The Antichrist's deception already begins to take shape in the world every time the claim is made to realize within history that messianic hope which can only be realized beyond history through the eschatological judgment. The Church has rejected even modified forms of this falsification of the kingdom to come under the name of millenarianism" (676).

The Magisterium also has warned against expecting a golden age of the kind predicted by postmillennialism before the Second Coming: "The kingdom will be fulfilled, then, not by a historic triumph of the Church through a progressive ascendancy, but only by God's victory over the final unleashing of evil, which will cause his Bride to come down from heaven" (CCC 677).

The millennial reign of Christ spoken of in Revelation 20 is thus taking place right now, for as he said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18), and as St. Paul declared, "He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor. 15:25–26).

## **19. What does the end of Revelation mean?**

The final part of Revelation contains a number of elements. The first deals with the events immediately after the millennium. It states that "when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations which are at the four corners of the earth" (20:7–8).

He will then gather them for battle, and "they marched up over the broad earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city" (20:9),

which is naturally interpreted either as a reference to Jerusalem or to the Church. However, fire comes down from heaven to defeat them, and the devil is thrown into the lake of fire where the beast and the false prophet had been confined after the battle of Armageddon (see answer 17).

Following this, the final judgment takes place, and “the dead, great and small” are judged. Everyone who has ever lived is brought back to life, for “Death and Hades gave up the dead in them” (Hades being the place that houses the dead). This is a permanent resurrection, because “Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire,” since there will no longer be a need for them. At the same time, the dead are assigned their fates, being judged “by what they had done,” and “if any one’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (20:11–15).

John then writes, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” (21:1). This prophecy of a new heaven and earth goes back to the book of Isaiah and is repeated elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., Isa. 65:17; 66:22, 2 Pet. 3:13). The *Catechism* speaks of this change as a renewal rather than a complete annihilation and replacement of the current cosmos (see answer 20).

A feature of the renovated cosmos is “the holy city, new Jerusalem,” which comes down out of heaven, “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (21:2). This expectation of a new or heavenly Jerusalem is found elsewhere in the New Testament (Gal. 4:25–26, Heb. 11:10, 16; 12:22).

Its descent to earth marks a radical change in the order of things, for now “the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people” (21:3). Ever since the fall, there has been a separation between God and man, but now that is overcome, with the result that God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (21:4).

We then encounter a section of the book devoted to the new Jerusalem (21:9–22:11). This section parallels the section on the Whore of Babylon (17:1–19:10), and they both begin and end the same way. Both start when one of the seven bowl angels takes John to a distant location to view the city in question, and both conclude with John being so overcome that he attempts to worship the angel and is told not to. This makes it clear that the two cities/women are mirror images of each other. One is unholy, the other

holy; one is a prostitute, the other a bride.

Given the contrast between the old Jerusalem and the new Jerusalem elsewhere in Scripture (cf. Gal. 4:21–31), some conclude that if the bride is the new Jerusalem, then the whore must be the current, apostate Jerusalem. However, many others see the whore as Rome or even as a symbol of any great city that sets itself against God.

The section dealing with new Jerusalem is the source of popular images of heaven, including “pearly gates” (i.e., gates cut out of giant pearls) and streets paved with gold (21:21). It also describes mankind once again having access to the tree of life from Genesis, since he is now immortal (22:2; cf. Gen. 3:22).

The images used in this section convey a sense of the glory and joy of our final destiny, but they need to be understood as symbols. The next age transcends what we can imagine, and we should recognize the symbolic nature of the images used to describe it. They are hints meant to convey a much greater reality.

For example, new Jerusalem is described as being 12,000 stadia long, wide, and tall (21:16). The number 12,000 combines the symbolic numbers 12 and 1,000, but we are not meant to take the distance literally. This distance is equivalent to 1,500 miles, but the city’s wall is only 144 cubits high (21:17). This is another symbolic number ( $144 = 12 \times 12$ ), and if taken literally it would represent a wall 216 feet high. But how could a city 1,500 miles tall be protected by a wall only 216 feet tall? This underscores the symbolic nature of these numbers—and of the images of this section in general.

According to the *Catechism*, “This mystery of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all understanding and description. Scripture speaks of it in images: life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the Father’s house, the heavenly Jerusalem, paradise: ‘no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’ (1 Cor. 2:9)” (1027).

The final part of Revelation is a closing epilogue that stresses the nearness of the events in the book. In the final chapter, there are five assurances on this point. Three times, Jesus says, “I am coming soon” (22:7, 12, 20), once John is told that the events of the book “must soon take place” (22:6), and he also is told, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near” (22:10). This is in direct contrast to Daniel, who was told to

seal up one of his visions, as it pertained to a distant, future time (Dan. 8:26).

The Spirit and the Bride then implore Jesus to come, and the one who hears the book read aloud in church is urged to implore Jesus to come (22:17). Finally, John himself urges Jesus to come (22:20). These would seem to be references to Jesus coming in judgment on the systems that oppress his people—whether Jewish, Roman, or otherwise—rather than the Second Coming at the end of time (see answer 6).

Although Revelation ends with a discussion of events that were in the far future from John's perspective—and that are still in the future from our perspective—the heavy emphasis on the nearness of the book as a whole strongly argues for an early fulfillment of the material in the book preceding the millennium.

That is what John led his readers to expect, it's the natural interpretation of the book, and it should be our interpretation as well—regardless of the application this material may also have to our future by way of additional fulfillments.

## **20. What does the Catholic Church teach about our future?**

The Catholic Church does not have a detailed set of teachings regarding precisely what will happen in our future. It largely leaves the interpretation of biblical texts to individual scholars.

It thus does not have an official teaching regarding how the book of Revelation is to be interpreted. Although many Catholic scholars advocate some form of preterism, the Church allows the book to be understood in historicist, idealist, or futurist senses—or in some combination of these.

However, the Church does have a set of teachings in broad strokes regarding what will happen in the future. As we noted (see answer 18), the Church rejects the idea that there will be a period before the end of the world in which Christ reigns physically on earth—perhaps from Jerusalem—as taught in millenarianism/premillennialism (CCC 676).

Instead, the Church recognizes that—in the present age—Christ already reigns from heaven (CCC 668; cf. Matt. 28:18, 1 Cor. 15:25, Eph. 1:20–21) and through the Church on earth (CCC 669–670; cf. Matt. 28:19–20, Eph. 1:22).

This present reign is partial in that not all of Christ's enemies have been defeated. There is still evil in the world, and—as St. Paul tells us—Jesus “must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:25–26). Therefore, Christ's kingdom will be fulfilled in a more definitive way in the future (CCC 671).

“According to the Lord,” the *Catechism* continues, “the present time is the time of the Spirit and of witness, but also a time still marked by ‘distress’ and the trial of evil which does not spare the Church [Acts 1:8; 1 Cor. 7:26; Eph. 5:16; 1 Pet. 4:17] and ushers in the struggles of the last days. It is a time of waiting and watching” (672).

How long this time will last is not known. “Since the Ascension Christ's coming in glory has been imminent, even though ‘it is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority’ [Acts 1:7; cf. Mark 13:32]. This eschatological coming could be accomplished at any moment, even if both it and the final trial that will precede it are ‘delayed’” (CCC 673).

This imminence does not mean that there will be no signs of the Second Coming. On the contrary, there will be.

One of these signs is a large-scale conversion of the Jewish people. “The glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by ‘all Israel,’ for ‘a hardening has come upon part of Israel’ in their ‘unbelief’ toward Jesus” (CCC 674, quoting from Rom. 11:20–26).

Another event that will occur is a great calamity that the *Catechism* refers to as “the Church's ultimate trial,” explaining, “Before Christ's second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers. The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth will unveil the ‘mystery of iniquity’ in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth. The supreme religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh” (CCC 675).

This trial will take a heavy toll on the Church, which “will follow her Lord in his death and resurrection. The kingdom will be fulfilled, then, not by a historic triumph of the Church through a progressive ascendancy, but only by God's victory over the final unleashing of evil, which will cause his Bride to come down from heaven [cf. Rev. 13:8, 20:7–10, 21:2–4]” (CCC 677).

Jesus will thus return, rescue his followers from this trial, and bring about the end of the present order of things. When his final enemy—death—is destroyed, the resurrection of the dead will occur, with every human who has ever lived brought back to life (CCC 988–1004).

The Last Judgment will come when Christ returns in glory. Only the Father knows the day and the hour; only he determines the moment of its coming. Then through his Son Jesus Christ he will pronounce the final word on all history. We shall know the ultimate meaning of the whole work of creation and of the entire economy of salvation and understand the marvelous ways by which his Providence led everything toward its final end. The Last Judgment will reveal that God’s justice triumphs over all the injustices committed by his creatures and that God’s love is stronger than death (CCC 1040).

At this point, men will receive their final fates—either heaven, if they have opened themselves to God’s love, or hell, if they have definitively closed themselves off from his offer of mercy and love (CCC 1023–1037). “After the universal judgment, the righteous will reign forever with Christ, glorified in body and soul. The universe itself will be renewed” (CCC 1042). “Sacred Scripture calls this mysterious renewal, which will transform humanity and the world, ‘new heavens and a new earth’ [2 Pet. 3:1; cf. Rev. 21:1]” (CCC 1043).

“In this new universe,” we may note with joy, “the heavenly Jerusalem, God will have his dwelling among men [cf. Rev. 21:5]. ‘He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away’ [Rev. 21:4]” (CCC 1044).

1 E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove, IL; Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press; Apollos, 2004), 163.

2 Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (London; New York: T&T Clark: A Continuum Imprint, 1993), xvi.

3 Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 85.

- 4 Dialogue with Trypho the Jew 81:4.
- 5 Eusebius, *Church History* 3:39:4–6.
- 6 *Lives of Illustrious Men* chs. 9 and 18.
- 7 Eusebius, *Church History* 3:39:6.
- 8 Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 445–452.
- 9 Cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5:30:3.
- 10 David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, vol. 52A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1997), 78.
- 11 Jimmy Akin, “The Structure of Revelation,” online at JimmyAkin.com.
- 12 For a discussion, see “The Structure of Revelation.”
- 13 Steve Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 1997), 181–183.
- 14 There also are books devoted to analyzing these matters, such as Steve Moyise’s *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* or G.K. Beale’s *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* and his *The Use of Daniel in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and in the Revelation of St. John*.
- 15 See Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2, epilogue.
- 16 Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views*, 34.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 31–32.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 20 Robert H. Mounce, *What Are We Waiting For? A Commentary on Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 65.
- 21 For example, in 3:15–16 Christ says that he wishes that the Laodiceans were either hot or cold, but because they are lukewarm, he will spit them out of his mouth. Archaeology has shown that this reflects the situation with the local water supply at the time. “The hot waters of Hierapolis had a medicinal effect, and the cold waters of Colossae were pure, drinkable, and had a life-giving effect. However, there is evidence that Laodicea had access only to warm water, which was not very palatable and caused nausea. Indeed, Laodicea had grown as a town because its position was conducive for commerce, but it was far from good water. When the city tried to pipe water in, it could manage only to obtain tepid, emetic water” (G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999], 303). Both hot water and cold

water are useful, but lukewarm water is useless and unpleasant—the state that Jesus says characterizes the Laodiceans.

22 Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: Part Two: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 222, emphasis added.

23 General Audience, Aug. 23, 2006.

24 See Adrienne Mayor, *Gods and Robots: Myths, Machines, and Ancient Dreams of Technology* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018), ch. 9.

25 “There were many reports in the ancient world of statues turning (Dio Cassius 41.61; 54.7), sweating (Cicero, *De div.* 1.43.98; Plutarch *Cor.* 38.1; *Anton.* 60), weeping (Augustine *Civ. dei* 3.11), or speaking (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Ant. Rom.* 8.56.2); several similar stories are collected in Plutarch *De pyth. orac.* 397E–398B.” David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 762.

## About the Author

Jimmy Akin is an internationally known author and speaker. He is the senior apologist at Catholic Answers. Jimmy has a degree in philosophy from the University of Arkansas and has worked professionally as an apologist for more than twenty-five years. His areas of expertise include apologetics, biblical studies, patristics, canon law, liturgical law, and philosophy. He is the author of numerous books, booklets, and articles. Jimmy's apologetic articles may be found online at [catholic.com](http://catholic.com) and his personal website, [jimmyakin.com](http://jimmyakin.com). He is a regular guest on *Catholic Answers Live* and also appears on other radio programs and podcasts.